

Just 20 minutes south of McChord Air Force Base, Wash., the capital city of Olympia boasts beautiful views (right) of south Puget Sound and the Cascade Mountains. Cherry trees (below) abound in the greater Seattle region. In 1976, the late Prime Minister Takeo Miki and the Japanese government gave the city 1,000 trees in celebration of the U.S. Bicentennial. The blossoms are synonymous with the coming of spring.



It Rains Too Much in Washington

And other debatable 'facts' about life around McChord Air Force Base

by Maj. Kimberly Tebrugge
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers



An omniscient, crusty chief master sergeant once said when explorers named Iceland and Greenland, they called the more frigid, less welcoming land "Greenland" and the more beautiful, temperate island "Iceland."

Their hope was newcomers would gravitate toward the kinder concept of "green," and fewer would infiltrate the land whose name brought to mind a frozen land mass.

It's the same kind of idea with the reputation locals foster about how much it rains in Washington. People who live there are typically pretty fond of it. Even possessive. Some generate subliminal messages that the Pacific Northwest, home to McChord Air Force Base, isn't as great as it appears, hop-

ing to curb the influx of new settlers.

However, chances are you can't pick up and move here on a whim. But if you promise not to tell, here are just a few inside images from a northwest native just in case you get an assignment to McChord.

The outdoors

I mentioned the rain. Don't get me wrong, it's a factor. But not necessarily near McChord. Parts of the nearby Olympic National Forest receive up to 240 inches annually. But near the base? A whole 37 inches per year. Compare that to Miami and Atlanta at 56, or New York at 42, and the myth begins to unravel.

In the winter, rain typically turns to snow in the mountains, but it rarely

snows near the base. Still, depending on the snow level, and more importantly, energy level, a person could conceivably snowboard Crystal Mountain all morning. Then take a mountain bike throughout the 90,000 acres of trails in the nearby Capital Forest in the afternoon. And as the sun sets, finish the day by kayaking to an island only accessible by boat and cooking your evening meal by campfire. And, there's nothing like kayaking at midnight during a full moon.

However, to ultimately enjoy the hundreds of miles of South Puget Sound coastline, it helps to have a boat with some speed. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, estimates nearly 2 million pink salmon will navigate nearby waters and

return to Puget Sound streams this summer, providing ample fishing opportunities. In the fall, the Deschutes River is a rewarding place to watch salmon move upstream before spawning.

Washington's "terroir" — blend of climate, soil and geography — produces a wealth of award-winning wines. I'd highly recommend a weekend touring and tasting some of the vineyards that led to Washington's recognition as "Wine Region of the Year" by Wine Enthusiast Magazine. Don't drink and drive. You can visit the Columbia Winery by way of the Spirit of Washington dinner train.

Coffeehouse culture

Don't like wine? How about some cof-

fee? I'm writing this while sitting on a lounge chair at Starbucks, the international coffee icon based in Seattle. There's pretty much one on every corner. What's the draw? Blame it on the rain, but I think it's the people. Washingtonians like to hang out. By themselves or with others. With or without reading material.

The guy next to me crashed on a long purple velvet couch like he's in his own living room. And no one but me notices. Cliques of all ages come to spend hours playing chess, sipping drinks, telling stories about the previous night or just making something up. It's where people connect, even if it's just by being in the same place at the same time without conversation. It's a lifestyle, a philosophy. These

words are painted on the wall:

*Speak softly
People will listen
Take your time
The world will wait*

Just when you've finished your second Italian Soda or Chai Tea, don't be surprised if a few tattooed guys and a girl dressed in black struggle through the door with guitars, amplifiers and even a set of drums. Grunge music that emerged in the '80s began right here with bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam and hundreds of others that made "indie rock" (or, music produced with independent labels) viable. Even on most weeknights, there are about 40 live music venues featuring groups like Lucy Lunchmouth, a Seattle band with an alternative folk-punk sound. And, an Air Force tie. Kim Ryan, wife of C-17 instructor pilot, Maj. Scott Ryan, is a Lucy Lunchmouth band member. Kim says because of the high number of bands in Seattle, they of-

ten have to share the stage. But, with so many options for music lovers to choose from, Kim said it means the most when members from the 97th Airlift Squadron turn out for her gigs.

Read the fine print

Music, coffee and fresh air ... it's so easy to discredit purely positive opinion. But life isn't all positive in the great northwest. There are some "downsides:"

■ You may actually get your sports utility vehicle muddy. There's a lot of water in Washington in the form of lakes, jagged Puget Sound coast and melting snow from nearby mountains. Even if you never get out of your car, the scenic drive to Mount Rainier, "fourteener" (reaching 14,410 feet), is a worthwhile 45-minute drive from McChord. Nearby Pacific beaches offer whale watching, clam digging and, for the brave-hearted, surfing in full-body neoprene wetsuits.

■ You'll need several sport racks for your vehicle and know how to swap them out quickly. Especially if you like to enjoy several sports over a weekend. Seattle is the second fittest city in the nation, according to Men's Fitness Magazine, so at least you'll be in good company.

■ You may not get home in time to watch "The OC" on television. Home from where? The coffee houses, outdoor lifestyle or music scene. Take your pick. Or come up with your own niche.

Washington is a place where you could go to the Fish Tale Ale Brewery in Olympia and have a state congressman drinking a beer to your left, but the girl who just bumped your elbow has purple hair and seven body piercings, only two of which are visible in public.

It's all part of the northwest low-key lifestyle of jeans with Birkenstocks culture. But just in case outsiders try to fit the right people in the right boxes, realize there's an unspoken concept commonly shared among residents (and not just the younger generations) about reading the book, not the cover.

The bearded guy sitting on the curb wearing a flannel shirt isn't homeless. He earned his Ph.D. when I was in grade school; now he challenges next year's international political science majors at a state university. And although locals may not dress to impress, Seattle's Convention and Visitors Bureau testifies the South Sound area leads the nation in percentage of residents with a college degree. It's also in first for Internet business start-ups.

If you get to McChord and want to blend in, get some coffee, get comfortable and get to know someone. ☺

McChord at a glance

Mission: This base is home to the 62nd Airlift Wing and 446th Airlift Wing (Reserve) — flying the C-17 Globemaster III — and the Air National Guard's Western Air Defense Sector. Both flying units support worldwide combat and humanitarian airlift contingencies. And it's a great place to

catch a "hop" for traveling Space-A. **Location:** With majestic Mount Rainier in the background, the base is located off Interstate 5. It's 10 miles south of Tacoma; 25 miles north of Olympia, the state capital; and about 42 miles south of Seattle.

Climate: The weather isn't what most people might expect. The average winter low is 34.2 degrees Fahrenheit, and the average winter high is 45-49 degrees.

Summer's high averages 76.3 degrees and the average summer low is 54 degrees.

Economy: The base has almost 1,000 family housing units, some built as recently as 1998. For renters, housing officials said, the average cost of a one-bedroom apartment or home runs in the area of \$650 to \$700 a month. A two-bedroom apartment or home starts at about \$850 a month. And a three-bedroom apartment or

home runs more than \$1,000 a month. **Recreation:** McChord has one elementary school, a golf course, youth center and sports pavilion. Also, miles of wooded trails border the housing areas. Also, there are tons of recreational activities around the base. State parks, lake and seashores, hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, boating, whale watching — you name it and it's close by.

Coffee houses abound

Starbucks is a household name but independent coffee houses are just as plentiful. Small coffee "drive thrus" are the sanity of Puget Sound cities. Little espresso stands are everywhere. Typically people have a regular stand they use and 'baristas' recognize customers' cars and have their orders started before they drive-up to the window.

"Good morning! I've got your tall nonfat double shot sugar-free vanilla latte started, it'll be just a minute." The only thing I haven't figured out is why every state hasn't embraced such caffeinated living?

After awhile all the espresso stands blend right in. Especially if they've combined services like Lighthouse Espresso and Shipping Services, owned for 15 years by Maj. Gregg Whitman, a Reserve C-17 instructor pilot, and his wife, Vicki. Their stand (drive by or go in — there's a table and two chairs) is also a mail center where you can ship packages, buy stamps or overnight your favorite blend of freshly roasted beans to your cousin in Kansas. If you hang out with the Whitmans awhile you'll quickly discover the truth: the coffee is often a cover-up. Regulars really go there for the conversation, camaraderie and friendship.

"This is the 'Cheers' place," Vicki said, referring to the TV sitcom. "People come here and tell us their stories. We try to



What began as a packaging and shipping business for Air Force reservist Maj. Gregg Whitman (seated in back) and his wife, Victoria (left), has boomed into a full-service espresso bar. Here, Victoria talks with her 13-year-old daughter BreAnna and her friends Lisa Carson and Blisina Bel. The bar is a favorite hangout for students from a neighboring school.

help them. We at least get them to smile before they go."

Many regulars don't even drink coffee. They like hot chocolate or Italian sodas. Especially the dozens of regulars who are too young to drive.

The stand is next to Stewart Middle School, and kids gather there before and after classes.

"Some kids came in who were failing out of school," Vicki said. The Whitmans became surrogate parents and soon knew when kids had the big tests, and hounded them for results. Slowly, many of the kids' grades improved (candy proved a decent motivator).

Even the school principal noticed. "You're like the family to them," the principal told Vicki.

"We don't have a sign saying 'the doctor is in' but we should," Gregg said.

— Maj. Kimberly Tebrugge



Crystal Magyari, daughter of Master Sgt. Pete Magyari, hits the slopes at Stryal Mountain ski resort — just an hour's drive from McChord. The resort's tallest slope reaches more than 7,000 ft.